

Interview with Thomas E. Malmo, Korean War corpsman and survivor of the Chosin Reservoir conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian, Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, 2 Nov 1998.

Where are you originally from?

I was born in Vancouver, British Columbia and then put in an orphanage 2 days later. I was then adopted and brought to Duluth, MN, when I was a year and a half old.

Where did you go to high school?

I went to Central High School in Duluth for my sophomore year and then went to Shattuck Military Academy in Faribault, MN.

When did you join the Navy?

I joined the Navy in the fall of '44 but then found out I wasn't a citizen of the country so I had to drop out while I went to immigration and went through the course and got my citizenship.

When was that?

December 5th 1944.

So you got your citizenship and then enlisted a second time.

Yes. I left at the end of January of '45. I went to Great Lakes and then to Hospital Corps school in San Diego.

Did you volunteer to be a corpsman?

No, they just thought that's what I should do because I had had so much experience in my dad's pharmacy.

What was the corps school like?

I went for 14 weeks. They had an accelerated corps school. Instead of the normal length of time, it was half the length. And I was the only one who wasn't a pre-med student. I figured they needed corpsmen for the invasion of Japan.

Where did you go from corps school?

From there I went to Treasure Island Naval Hospital and from there I went overseas right after the war was over, ending up in Tokyo.

What did you do in Tokyo?

I worked at what was called an auxiliary personnel lodging (APL-46). We gave it the nickname of the Mark Hopkins Hotel because it was for NAVTECH people going to Tokyo to learn stuff about the war crimes trials. Some of those APLs were machine shops, some were living quarters, and ours happened to be a living quarters. And that's how I got to Tokyo.

What were your duties there?

When I first went on board the ship there were four corpsmen and a doctor and it ended up with two of us and a doctor.

What did the APL look like?

It was a huge houseboat with no screws of its own. It had a cement bottom. Our APL was moored right next to the Itobashi Bridge on the Sumida River in Tokyo. That bridge would not raise up so we were as far up as you could go about a mile and a quarter from St. Luke's Hospital, which was a Japanese hospital taken over by the Army. We were about a mile and a half from the Emperor's palace.

So you weren't far away from the prison where the war crimes trials were taking place?

No. I used to go to the war crimes trials because I was very interested. I would go every time I would get a chance. Maybe I went ten times or so.

What were your duties on the ship.

We acted as a motel for the Navy personnel coming into Tokyo. The APL had a sick bay on it with a dental office and we had a dentist part of the time. It ended up with just two of us corpsmen running it for medical stuff. If we had anything bad, we sent them to St. Luke's Hospital, [361st Station Hospital (Army)].

How long were you there?

I was there from shortly after we occupied Japan about the end of September '45. I was in the Navy 19 months. Then I went into the inactive reserve. Then a doctor in Duluth, a Dr. Strauss, wanted to start a Marine Corps reserve unit in Duluth and he needed a corpsman. I volunteered. He stayed home and I went to Korea.

What did you do after you got out of the Navy?

I went back to school, business school. I'm not a pharmacist. I took business and my cousin took pharmacy. We were taking over my father's store in Duluth. I was going to run the surgical business.

How did this whole Korea thing start?

I was in the reserves and they called up the reserves--our company and Company B. When I was in business school I transferred from B Company in Duluth to A Company in Minneapolis. In February of 1950 my wife to be and I went down and asked for a discharge from the reserve and the master sergeant said that I would be out in 4 months anyway. I was supposed to get out on the 19th of August of that year and lo and behold I got called up on the 7th. The sergeant never turned my papers in so I got called up.

Where did you go from Minneapolis?

Camp Pendleton. A guy came out and told us that he needed 50 corpsmen and 3 doctors to go to an air base. As long as I was being called up I was one of the first ones in line. After they got all our names down, out comes this guy with all these medals. He said, "I'm glad to see there's still a few red-blooded Americans." That's all we heard. We found out we had volunteered to go to Korea.

You didn't know you had volunteered for Korea?

No. The only air base the Marines had was El Toro. They then flew us to Korea. We landed in Japan but didn't stay there long.

Did you get any training before you left?

No. We already had training. We landed at Inchon. We were sent in as replacements.

What do you remember about that episode?

I remember going across the river. There was a reporter named Margaurite Higgins who called the Marines a bunch of bragging bastards. At the river we all gave as much money as we could to the driver of one of these "ducks" to sink it. After she got out of there she wrote another article saying they have a right to be bragging bastards.

Were you there during the fighting?

We took Seoul. Then we went up to the [38th] Parallel. By that time most of the Koreans were gone.

Had you treated patients at this point?

Yes. While the fighting was going on.

What did you see in Seoul?

Everything blown up and kids needing help. We went into what they called the Chosin Christian College in Seoul. That had been bombed. We weren't supposed to be treating Koreans but we did anyway. I couldn't pass up little kids. One time a little girl came up to me holding out her finger saying, "Itay, itay, itay. And she was just crying her heart out. I took her finger and put a little bandage on it. And she was still was crying. I turned and noticed that the whole side of her face was blown open. I couldn't believe it. Those are the things that made you say, "The hell with regulations. I'm going to treat children. They didn't start the war and neither did I."

Were you able to treat the little girl?

Oh yes. We bandaged her and got her to a place where she could get some help. We took our helmets, put alcohol in them mixed with merthiolate so it would go much farther. This is how we dealt with infection.

From Seoul you went up to the 38th parallel.

Up there we had an ox cart come through a mined road. And that was a disaster. There was a little girl in the ox cart. We treated the other kids who were hurt but had to amputate her leg. She lived until noon the next day.

Where were you along the parallel.

We were due north of Seoul.

What unit were you with?

I was with H Company, Third Battalion, Fifth Marines. And that was part of a provisional Marine brigade which later became the First Marine Division.

How long were you up at the parallel before you went to Chosin?

We were at the parallel for maybe 5 days at the most. And then they took us back to Inchon Harbor and we boarded a ship and went around the peninsula and made an unopposed landing up on the far side, the Tokyo side, at Wonson Harbor. We then went through “Nightmare Alley” up to the Chosin Reservoir. That was in October of 1950.

What did you all do up there at Chosin?

We were sent up there to secure the area. The Chinese hadn’t officially entered the war at that point. And then on Thanksgiving Day we made a trip, up the east side of the Reservoir. It started out as a 30-man patrol and they later cut it down to 12 men and 1 corpsman so that made 13 of us. We went up a draw supposedly chasing 23 Chinese that had been in there. It was kind a trip in itself because the squad leader, I found out, was a soldier who had never had combat but had been in the Marine Reserve just like I had. We started to go down this road, he said, “OK, we’ll go down this road.” I said, “Sergeant, have you had any combat training?” He said no. I told him that I had 2 years of military tactics and science in high school. You don’t walk single file down a road. You stagger your troops. So we staggered the troops and got up to this little village. And then we decided to go back with the information we had gathered. I asked him where we were going to go. And he said “Back down the road where we came from. I told him that if there were 23 Chinese down that road we were dead meat. We had to go up and over the hill. Having a pretty good sense of direction, I told him we should end up near our outpost. So we started over the hill and a plane came flying over-- a Piper Cub type of plane. And I said, “Lay out your air panels.” And he said, “What the hell are air panels?” They were orange or red flags you put out to identify yourselves. He didn’t know what to do so I said, “Everyone take a letter of “Oh shit” and stamp it out in the snow. Then the plane came over, made two more passes, and then on the third one he wagged his wings. I took my hand like I was pointing and all of a sudden he came back and wagged his wings and I said, “We’re going in the right direction then because that’s what he’s letting us know.

Did you see any Chinese while you were up there?

Oh, yes. I caught a glimpse of a couple of them as we went into that village and that’s why I wasn’t too eager to go back down that road. But you couldn’t be sure whether they were Chinese or North Koreans.

Were they wearing those quilted uniforms?

Some were. The uniforms were greenish-gray. But we got out of there and didn’t get shot at that day.

When would that have been?

Thanksgiving day because they had Thanksgiving dinner for us when we got back.

What did you get to eat?

They had shrimp and all kinds of things flown in for us, turkey and all the trimmings.

Were you living in tents or what?

We were living in whatever we could live in. We put up shelter halves.

Were there any permanent buildings around?

A few. The next day we went up the other side of the Reservoir and that's when the Chinese came into the war.

So, your normal duty then before the Chinese showed up was just patrolling.

Patrolling and checking things out.

You were at the lower end of the Reservoir at this point?

Yes.

What were you doing as a corpsman?

Just taking care of anybody who was hurt or needed help. I always watched for civilian kids who needed help.

What kind of supplies did you carry?

We mainly carried bandages and things like that because you didn't have a lot... But we had a battalion aid station that would follow behind us. If you were in a company or a squad you went down to the battalion aid station when you needed things.

Did you carry a medical kit?

Oh, yes. I had suture material in there and a scalpel and mosquito forceps.

Mosquito forceps?

A hemostat. I also had a thermometer in a metal case.

Did you have anything like penicillin?

We had Aureomycin which had just come out.

Did you have sulfa drugs?

We didn't have that much because you couldn't carry that much with you.

So you didn't have any plasma either?

No, no.

So if you got yourself into any kind of situation with wounded, you were in trouble.

Right. On one occasion a kid lost his arm. It was just before dark and I said, "I gotta tie this guy's arm off." Maybe there are nine blood vessels you tie off in an arm. I had 21 knots tied and anything that started to bleed I tied off. And I was under a tarp while I was doing this. You couldn't have any light showing.

How did he lose his arm?

He got shot or a grenade went off next to him. And there was only about an inch and a half of flesh left and I took out my regular hunting knife, the K-Bar, and his friend put a rifle to my head and said, "Don't do it." I said, "Shoot me and we both die. We've got to try to save his life." So then he realized that I was trying to save him and not hurt him.

Did he survive?

The last I heard, he had.

What was it like the morning you woke up and realized that you and your buddies were in a heap of trouble?

It was about 11:30 at night.

Do you remember what date that was?

It may have been the first of December. I can't remember precisely the night the Chinese entered. I know I pulled out of the area on the fifth of December 1950 which was on the anniversary date of my becoming a citizen. It was at 7:30 in the morning. I put my patients on a plane and the pilot and copilot said, "Where are you going?" I said "The orders are that if you can walk, you walk out." And they said, "With gunny sacks for shoes?" The first sergeant didn't draw us our fall-winter gear. He just got it for the Marines and not us. So we had to make do. The irony of the thing was that it was a Royal Canadian Air Force plane, the country of my birth. They both looked at me, grabbed me, and threw me on the plane and said, "You can't walk out."

I want to back track a little. You're up there and it was Thanksgiving when you saw your first Chinese. You got back to your base camp and it wasn't but a few days later when the Chinese entered the war.

No. It was 2 days later.

What was the weather like at that time?

They said it didn't get above 20 below zero for awhile.

And you said you hadn't drawn any winter gear at all.

Well, we had some stuff but not all of it. Whenever anyone got hurt...died... down below we took their winter gear.

What kind of clothing did you have to keep yourself warm?

I weighed 134 pounds when I got to the hospital. When I went to Korea I weighed 190. And I had about a size 48 winter parka. All I had to do is just bend down. It was like sitting inside of a tent.

What about your foot gear?

I finally found some sandbags and put about four or five of them over each one of my shoes which was great because it was just like insulation.

You didn't have combat boots?

No. Well, I had combat boots, but not winter combat boots.

So, what do you remember about the morning the Chinese showed up?

They showed up in the middle of the night. And they were just running wild. They came down running and screaming down the middle of our ranks blowing bugles. There were skyrocketing going off. I told everyone not to move unless you have to because they'd go right on by you. They got by two companies on the side of the hill and way down into the secured area.

No shots were fired?

Oh yea. They were shooting. Everybody was shooting here and there. They went into the battalion aid station where they were working on wounded. The doctor who was there said they opened up the flap and the Chinese looked at them. The doctor thought that was it but the Chinese looked, bowed, and backed out. They actually let our ambulances go out the following day until some officer got the stupid idea of putting ammunition in to bring it up to us who were trapped. From then on they just blew up the ambulances.

Were you in your tent while all this was going on?

No. We were just dug in on the ground in snow banks.

How did you survive that?

After they ran through, they withdrew back and had us surrounded. Instead of keeping us from going the way we wanted to, we pretended we were fighting all the way around and they were going to try to squeeze us in by shortening the circle. We finally broke out that way.

Did you have a weapon?

I was supposed to carry a carbine. When we first went to Korea, a Navy corpsman could use a pistol. Then someone got the bright idea that we were supposed to TQ (technical quality) our weapons according to what Washington said we should have. So that was a carbine. Well, that was the stupidest thing in the world because every time you did your job you'd fall on that carbine and it would jam you here or there.

So you were better off with a pistol then?

Right. If you're doing your job you don't have time to use a carbine or anything anyway. Every time there's a shot fired and somebody's hit, you're doing your job. You don't have time to fire a rifle.

Did you treat any of the wounded?

Yes. A kid got shot. I was treating a wounded guy and I heard another guy yell corpsman. It was over a little draw. I was just going to finish bandaging him up when this friend of mine named Cleveland Kinsey from Oklahoma tapped me on the shoulder and said, "I'll get him Tommy." And then I heard this kid holler again for a corpsman. And I said, "Hey, Kinsey, what's happened. And he said, "Stay where you are. They have a machine gun on that draw. I then heard a grenade go off and I figured they got the machine gun. I went on up. Both of them were shot the same way, the guy Kinsey went to treat and Kinsey himself was shot the same way. We got them both out on stretchers on ambulances. The one kid who was shot, the bullet came out and he didn't survive. But with Kinsey, the bullet stayed in and that's the most dangerous kind and he survived. So you never know.

So, you had ambulances up there?

Yes. They had field ambulances for the battalion aid station.

And when you loaded patients on them, the Chinese didn't shoot at them?

No. They didn't shoot at them until they began lugging ammunition.

Initially, did you know that your attackers were Chinese?

We knew they were Chinese.

Did they leave any of their wounded behind?

Oh, yes. When we were coming down off this ridge, there was a young Chinese boy that was wounded. They had him on a tarp. Four guys each had a corner of the tarp and then were bouncing the tarp on the ground. And I said, "Hey, cut it out. He didn't start the war, neither did I, neither did you. Treat him with a little respect." And they said, "But he's a Chinaman." I said, "That doesn't make a bit of difference. Lay him down a minute." And I bandaged his cut where he'd been shot. It was just a superficial wound. And the kid even got a smile on his face. I told them to take him down to the battalion aid station and for them to get an interpreter. Maybe he could tell us something that might save our lives.

That must have been a long night.

It was long.

What happened the following day?

They had withdrawn and there were bodies all over the place. We ran around to see who we could save and who we couldn't.

Were a lot of these your own wounded?

Some were already dead and some were wounded.

And you didn't have much to work with.

No. It was so cold, we had to keep the morphine syrettes in our mouths with the needles out to keep from being frozen. We looked like tigers with fangs.

How far away was the battalion aid station?

I can't remember. We didn't have any time to think. I'd get two guys to haul a body out if they could. If one could walk and support a guy... We couldn't salvage any of the dead so I had something like 200 or so dog tags after the Chinese entered the war.

You saved the dog tags of the ones who didn't make it,

That's right.

That must have been pretty discouraging.

When I was in the hospital in Japan and I had to take psychiatric treatment, the doctors said, "What do you mean you have a map?" I said, "I have a visual map when I shut my eyes where everybody's buried in case I have to go back and find their bodies. I can't help it. I can't get rid of it. The captain in our company put two different medical tags on me for combat fatigue and I tore them up. He wanted me shipped out and I said, "I'm doing my job."

What did you do with the casualties after you got them down to the battalion aid station?

We evacuated them either by ambulance or aboard the weapons carriers-- the trucks. If they were bandaged and could sit, they went by truck. They could sit on top and be able to protect themselves by shooting from the top of the truck. So they would convoy those guys out.

Did you all stay in that position or had someone decided you had to get out of there?

The next day we were down in the center area and they took our company and put us on the right hand side of the point to fight our way back out down to Hagaru-ri, which was where they made an emergency airfield.

You still had your regular combat boots and were wearing the gunny sacks.

Yes.

You also mentioned the parka. Was that keeping you warm?

Oh, yea. It was my feet that I froze.

What about your hands?

Well I froze my hands too because most of the time I had to take my gloves off to treat patients. And it was well below zero.

And the wind was blowing. It was probably the worst place to be at the time.

We thought so.

How about rations?

The only thing you could eat were the rations, the parts that were frozen. In the one ration you got these round discs maybe a half inch thick. They were like cereal and you'd crunch them up and put them in your mess kit and put water in to dissolve it. But everything was so cold up there we just gnawed on them. I went from 190 pounds ...

How long were you up there before you got out?

From Thanksgiving Day to the fifth of December at 7:30 in the morning when I was flown out.

From Hagaru-ri?

Yes.

But you walked your way down there?

Oh, yea. Along the mountain ridge. We were on the right hand point.

How long did it take to walk out?

I think it was 3 or 4 days but I know one morning we woke up and about 50 yards in front of us sitting looking down into the gorge where the troops would be going through was a Chinaman with his back to us. Nobody made any noise and the old man counted one...two...three, and these guys shot. He then said, "Doc, go see if he's dead." And I said, "No wonder they call you Marines stupid. The guy's body bounced about 5 feet."

This happened along a road?

It was the road that went up on the west side of the Chosin Reservoir. We had gone up there on the eastern road.

There were also vehicles on the road?

Yes but we weren't on the road. We're up on the mountainside about a mile above the road.

And as your walking along there was a lot of snow and ice.

Oh, yes.

Was it dark when you saw this Chinese soldier?

It was just as dawn broke. We had stopped for the night. We didn't march at night. He had infiltrated during the night but hadn't seen us. Being from northern Minnesota, I told all these guys who didn't know anything about snow, I said, "Cover yourselves up with snow. It will keep you warm." And that's what we did and he didn't see us. He was sitting, leaning against a tree watching for the troops to come down the valley.

So this Chinese has about six M1s aimed at him at the same time?

Yes.

The vehicles then were down on the road and they had the worst time because the Chinese were lying in ambush waiting for them.

Oh, yes. Of course, we were on the point so we would see this and shoot at them. This is how we protected the column.

You had to be really cold by this time?

Yes. It was cold. And we were cold. But those tablets were the best thing because you just gnaw on them.

These weren't like C-rations but more like K-rations. They were dry and you didn't have to open cans.

Yes.

Did you have a lot of people to treat at this point for frostbite?

You couldn't treat them there. They had to wait till they got to the hospital.

What about wounds?

If you had a very slight wound, the cold saved you. Being cold the blood coagulated a lot faster.

And you didn't have much to work with but for the bandages. Did you ever run out of bandages?

No. A lot of times I simply used pieces of material. It wasn't according to hoyle but saving lives was the important thing.

So you finally made it to the airfield at Hagaru-ri.

They had made this airfield out of a rice paddy and they flew in DC-3s. They had flown in a number of comforters from Japan and I told the guys to get into those comforters and we'd stay on the edge of the airfield so we'd be there first thing in the morning. But I also told them to poke their heads out.

What were these comforters?

They were big quilts.

When you originally went up to the Reservoir did you all have your health records with you?

No. I never saw any.

When you withdrew, you must have left a lot of stuff behind.

Oh, yea. I had a foxhole periscope that I carried from the southern part of Korea up through the north and all over. And this one night they told us to leave everything at the bottom of a hill and they rode a tank over everything. We got out of there just with what we had on us.

What was going on down at the airfield? What did it look like?

It was a large rice paddy filled with snow that had been plowed.

Did you have frostbite?

Yes. Fortunately, I knew enough to keep wiggling my fingers and toes and kept telling the guys to do that also. Even today, I have trouble picking things up because the tips of my fingers are numb. And I drive my wife crazy by drumming my feet and tapping my fingers all the time. That's to keep the circulation.

I remember there was a big thing about the importance of changing socks.

Well we didn't change clothes for over 2 weeks. And when we flew out of that rice paddy, we ended up in Hamhung. There we got the first hot food we had. Then all of a sudden everybody was gone. An officer came up to me and I saw he was a chaplain. He said something. I had had a concussion from a bomb that exploded right near a hole I was in. And I couldn't hear too well. The chaplain got right in my face and said very slowly, "Do you want to go to Japan." I nodded my head and then tried to walk but my feet weren't working too well. He was about 6 ft. 3, if he was an inch. He threw me over his shoulder and threw me on the back of a truck and right out to the airfield and onto the plane, a bigger one, bound for Japan.

Was this at Hamhung?

No. We went from Hagaru-ri on the front lines down to Wonson, and from there to Itsugi Air Force Base. And there they took us to the hospital, and there they just cut our clothes right off of us. And that's when I found out I had a shrapnel wound. We were in the shower. I said, "One of you guys is bleeding." And then I discovered it was me. The shrapnel was just below my kneecap. I had thought a mortar man had dropped a baseplate on my leg. I went in and climbed on the table because that was my job. And the nurse came in and said, "What are you doing?" I said, "I'm taking care of this wound in my leg." She said, "You're not supposed to do that. We do that."

So you extracted this piece of shrapnel.

There was just a small piece of metal in there and I got it all out.

What did they do for your frostbite?

There wasn't much they could do. The tissue was real tender and sore so they didn't let us wear shoes.

What hospital was this?

We started out in the Itsugi Air Force Base Hospital and then they shipped us by train to Yokosuka. I was there for awhile and then they sent us up to Kyoto.

You said that you had a lot of psychological problems after what you went through.

A native American sergeant was sitting by a tree and he let out a yell and blood was trickling down his face and I went and lifted his helmet up and that bullet had acted like a saw because I lifted the whole top of his head off. And his brain was just pulsating there. Those things aren't supposed to happen but... Then I had to cut another kid's arm off. I had this dream quite often where I put the arm on that guy's head and I'd wake up screaming.

And you started having these dreams while you were in the hospital?

Yes.

What did they do for you?

They gave us counseling and psychiatric help. We had group therapy and everybody would talk about their experiences and then you'd find out that you weren't the only screwball having problems.

Have you had any recurrences of the dreams?

No.

Where did you go after you were released from the hospital in Japan?

Great Lakes.

By the time you got there, had your frostbite pretty much been taken care of?

Just about. But now, so many years later, its acting up again. I don't know whether its a combination of my diabetes or whether its the frostbite. But the doctors think its mainly the frostbite.

How long were you at Great Lakes?

Not too long because I was eligible to get out. I think I was there about 3 or 4 months at the most. I got home in time to go to college in the fall.